Experiential learning

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Experiential learning is the process of learning through experience, and is more specifically defined as "learning through reflection on doing".[1] **Hands-on learning** is a form of experiential learning but does not necessarily involve students reflecting on their product.[2][3][4] Experiential learning is distinct from rote or didactic learning, in which the learner plays a comparatively passive role.[5] It is related to but not synonymous with other forms of active learning such as action learning, adventure learning, free choice learning, cooperative learning, and service-learning.[6]



Shimer College students learning to cook by cooking, 1942.

Experiential learning is often used synonymously with the term "experiential education", but while experiential education is a broader philosophy of education, experiential learning considers the individual learning process.[7] As such, compared to experiential education, experiential learning is concerned with more concrete issues related to the learner and the learning context.

The general concept of learning through experience is ancient. Around 350 BCE, Aristotle wrote in the *Nichomachean Ethics* "for the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them".[8] But as an articulated educational approach, experiential learning is of much more recent vintage. Beginning in the 1970s, David A. Kolb helped to develop the modern theory of experiential learning, drawing heavily on the work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget.[9]

Experiential learning has significant teaching advantages. Peter Senge, author of The Fifth Discipline (1990), states that teaching is of utmost importance to motivate people. Learning only has good effects when learners have the desire to absorb the knowledge. Therefore, experiential learning requires the showing of directions for learners.[10]

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Kolb experiential learning model

Experiential learning focuses on the learning process for the individual. One example of experiential learning is going to the zoo and learning through observation and interaction with the zoo environment, as opposed to reading about animals from a book. Thus, one makes discoveries and experiments with knowledge firsthand, instead of hearing or reading about others' experiences. Likewise, in business school, internship, and job-shadowing, opportunities in a student’s field of interest can provide valuable experiential learning which contributes significantly to the student’s overall understanding of the real-time environment.[11]

A third example of experiential learning involves learning how to ride a bike,[12] a process which can illustrate the four-step experiential learning model (ELM) as set forth by Kolb[13] and outlined in Figure 1 below. Following this example, in the "concrete experience" stage, the learner physically experiences the bike in the "here-and-now".[14] This experience forms "the basis for observation and reflection" and the learner has the opportunity to consider what is working or failing (reflective observation), and to think about ways to improve on the next attempt made at riding (abstract conceptualization). Every new attempt to ride is informed by a cyclical pattern of previous experience, thought and reflection (active experimentation).[14]

Figure 1 – David Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (ELM)[15]

	→ Concrete Experience ↓	
Active Experimentation		Reflective Observation
	↑ Abstract Conceptualization ←	

Elements

Experiential learning can exist without a teacher and relates solely to the meaning-making process of the individual's direct experience. However, though the gaining of knowledge is an inherent process that occurs naturally, a genuine learning experience requires certain elements.[6] According to Kolb, knowledge is continuously gained through both personal and environmental experiences.[16] Kolb states that in order to gain genuine knowledge from an experience, the learner must have four abilities:

- The learner must be willing to be actively involved in the experience;
- The learner must be able to reflect on the experience;
- The learner must possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience; and
- The learner must possess decision making and problem solving skills in order to use the new ideas gained from the experience.

Implementation

Experiential learning requires self-initiative, an "intention to learn" and an "active phase of learning".[17] Kolb's cycle of experiential learning can be used as a framework for considering the different stages involved.[18] Jennifer A. Moon has elaborated on this cycle to argue that experiential learning is most effective when it involves: 1) a "reflective learning phase" 2) a phase of learning resulting from the actions inherent to experiential learning, and 3) "a further phase of learning from feedback".[17] This process of learning can result in "changes in judgment, feeling or skills" for the individual[19] and can provide direction for the "making of

judgments as a guide to choice and action".[20]

Most educators understand the important role experience plays in the learning process. The role of emotion and feelings in learning from experience has been recognised as an important part of experiential learning.[17] While those factors may improve the likelihood of experiential learning occurring, it can occur without them. Rather, what is vital in experiential learning is that the individual is encouraged to directly involve themselves in the experience, and then to reflect on their experiences using analytic skills, in order that they gain a better understanding of the new knowledge and retain the information for a longer time.

Reflection is a crucial part of the experiential learning process, and like experiential learning itself, it can be facilitated or independent. Dewey wrote that "successive portions of reflective thought grow out of one another and support one another", creating a scaffold for further learning, and allowing for further experiences and reflection.[21] This reinforces the fact that experiential learning and reflective learning are iterative processes, and the learning builds and develops with further reflection and experience. Facilitation of experiential learning and reflection is challenging, but "a skilled facilitator, asking the right questions and guiding reflective conversation before, during, and after an experience, can help open a gateway to powerful new thinking and learning".[22] Jacobson and Ruddy, building on Kolb's four-stage Experiential Learning Model[14] and Pfeiffer and Jones's five stage Experiential Learning Cycle,[23] took these theoretical frameworks and created a simple, practical questioning model for facilitators to use in promoting critical reflection in experiential learning. Their "5 Questions" model is as follows:[22]

- Did you notice...?
- Why did that happen?
- Does that happen in life?
- Why does that happen?
- How can you use that?

These questions are posed by the facilitator after an experience, and gradually lead the group towards a critical reflection on their experience, and an understanding of how they can apply the learning to their own life.[22] Although the questions are simple, they allow a relatively inexperienced facilitator to apply the theories of Kolb, Pfeiffer, and Jones, and deepen the learning of the group.

While it is the learner's experience that is most important to the learning process, it is also important not to forget the wealth of experience a good facilitator also brings to the situation. However, while a facilitator, or "teacher", may improve the likelihood of experiential learning occurring, a facilitator is not essential to experiential learning. Rather, the mechanism of experiential learning is the learner's reflection on experiences using analytic skills. This can occur without the presence of a facilitator, meaning that experiential learning is not defined by the presence of a facilitator. Yet, by considering experiential learning in developing course or program content, it provides an opportunity to develop a framework for adapting varying teaching/learning techniques into the classroom.[24]

In schools

See also: Experiential education

Experiential learning is supported in different school organizational models and learning environments.

- Think Global School is a four-year traveling high school that holds classes in a new country each term.

Students engage in experiential learning through activities such as workshops, cultural exchanges, museum tours, and nature expeditions.
- The Dawson School in Boulder, Colorado, devotes two weeks of each school year to experiential learning, with students visiting surrounding states to engage in community service, visit museums and scientific institutions, and engage in activities such as mountain biking, backpacking, and canoeing.
- In the ELENA-Project www.elena-project.eu (http://www.elena-project.eu), the follow-up project of „animals live“, the experiential learning with living animals will be developed. Together with project partners from Romania, Hungary and Georgia the Bavarian Academy of Nature Conservation and Landscape Management in Germany brings living animals in the lessons of European schools. Aim is to brief children for the context of the biological diversity and to support them to develop ecologically oriented values.[25]
- Loving High School in Loving, New Mexico, publishes career and technical education opportunities for students. These include the internship for students who are interesting in science, STEM majors, or architecture. The school is making good connections with local businesses, which helps students get used to working in such environment.
- Lake View High School in Chicago, Illinois is the institution which offers early college credits for students. It trains students with majors such as STEM, humanities, music/ art, and languages. [26]

In business education

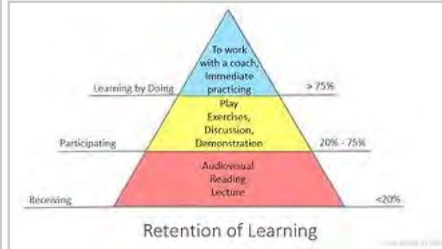
As higher education continues to adapt to new expectations from students, experiential learning in business and accounting programs has become more important. For example, Clark & White (2010) point out that "a quality university business education program must include an experiential learning component".[27] With reference to this study, employers note that graduating students need to build skills in "professionalism" – which can be taught via experiential learning. Students also value this learning as much as industry.

Learning styles also impact business education in the classroom. Kolb transposes four learning styles, *Diverger, Assimilator, Accommodator* and *Converger*, atop the Experiential Learning Model, using the four experiential learning stages to carve out "four quadrants", one for each learning style. An individual’s dominant learning style can be identified by taking Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory (LSI). Robert Loo (2002) undertook a meta-analysis of 8 studies which revealed that Kolb’s learning styles were not equally distributed among business majors in the sample.[28] More specifically, results indicated that there appears to be a high proportion of assimilators and a lower proportion of accommodators than expected for business majors. Not surprisingly, within the accounting sub-sample there was a higher proportion of convergers and a lower proportion of accommodates. Similarly, in the finance sub-sample, a higher proportion of assimilators and lower proportion of divergers was apparent. Within the marketing sub-sample there was an equal distribution of styles. This would provide some evidence to suggest that while it is useful for educators to be aware of common learning styles within business and accounting programs, they should be encouraging students to use all four learning styles appropriately and students should use a wide range of learning methods.[28]

Professional education applications, also known as management training or organizational development, apply experiential learning techniques in training employees at all levels within the business and professional environment. Interactive, role-play based customer service training is often used in large retail chains.[29] Training board games simulating business and professional situations such as the Beer Distribution Game used to teach supply chain management, and the Friday Night at the ER game used to teach systems thinking, are used in business training efforts.[30]

Comparisons

Experiential learning is most easily compared with academic learning, the process of acquiring information through the study of a subject without the necessity for direct experience. While the dimensions of experiential learning are analysis, initiative, and immersion, the dimensions of academic learning are constructive learning and reproductive learning.[32] Though both methods aim at instilling new knowledge in the learner, academic learning does so through more abstract, classroom-based techniques, whereas experiential learning actively involves the learner in a concrete experience.



Experiential Learning is more efficient than passive learning like reading or listening.[31]

Benefits

- Experience real world: For example, students who major in Chemistry may have chances to interact with the chemical environment. Learners who have a desire to become businesspeople will have the opportunity to experience the manager position
- Opportunities for creativity: There is always more than one solution for a problem in the real world. Students will have a better chance to learn that lesson when they get to interact with real life experiences[33]

See also

People

Wikiversity has learning materials about ***Experiential learning***

- John Dewey
- Paulo Freire
- Kurt Hahn
- David A. Kolb
- Maria Montessori
- Jean Piaget
- Carl Rogers
- Rudolf Steiner

See also

- Action learning
- Active learning
- Adult education
- Adventure education
- Alternative education
- Appreciative Inquiry
- Business game
- Case method
- Constructivism (philosophy of education)
- Cooperative education

- Cooperative learning
- Design-based learning
- Discovery learning
- Experiential learning – Farmer Field School program
- Integrative learning
- Large-group capacitation
- Outdoor education
- Project-based learning
- Problem-based learning
- Public sphere pedagogy
- Reflective practice
- Reggio Emilia approach
- Ropes course
- Service-learning
- Sloyd
- STEM fields
- Sudbury model of democratic education
- Training simulation
- Vocational education

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